Plop
(how good ideas get lost)

Giancarlo Livraghi – May 2011

"Plop" is the noise of something falling into the water.
Into the sea, a lake, a river or a pond. Not a big splash,
maybe not even a perceivable sound. For a short while,
it makes a bit of a wave. Then it disappears.

Often it sinks, like a stone. Or perhaps it floats, like
a piece of wood, but it moves away, carried by the flow.
It can vanish forever, out of our sight. Or, sometimes,
reappear unexpectedly – after days, or months, or years.

"Plop" is also the mental perception that we have when
something, that seemed interesting, fades into nothing.

It can be an idea that we discover reading a book, or a newspaper, or something online, or listening to a conversation.

We are interested, sometimes enthusiastic. We do all we can to understand, share, develop its potential. But silence and superficiality prevail. In the overwhelming noise of the obvious, the banal and the useless, it gets lost. To later, maybe, reappear as "new" in another context, where (if it doesn't sink) it is often warped and deformed, losing its meaning and relevance.

Or it can be our idea. Of course we find it necessary to have other people's opinions. If they listen, they help us to improve it. If the dialogue is interesting, we are gradually led to believe that it may be worth developing. Sometimes it happens. More often, in spite of the agreement, it gets lost. *Plop*.

It can be an idea, a project, an initiative suggested by someone else. We like it, we do all we can to support it and develop it. We invest time, attention, work. But then the idea disappears in a maze of distraction and absence. Also those who had originally suggested it drop out, for no understandable reason. These disappointments teach us, unfortunately, to become mistrustful.

Maybe it's our "fault", because we didn't understand well enough, or we didn't find the right way to develop an idea or a project? To some extent, it is probably so. But there are dismaying "plop factors" that sink even the most intelligent and best organized projects.

One of the most formidable obstacles is "it can't be done". Obviously any intention or desire that isn't within the limits of the "already known" runs into the problem that it's "impossible" to make it happen while remaining in the beaten track of habit and "usual ways". But that is no good reason to give up.

As Antonio Machado used to say, *«se hace camino al andar»* ("we make the road by walking".) There can be no progress if not tracing a path where there are no paved roads or traffic signs.

If an idea is good, we need to understand *how* we can make it happen – often doing something different from what we had in mind, because it's a better way of achieving the same result.

Another dangerous enemy is haste. We are all, to some extent, infected by this disease. I often feel the need to say to myself, before anyone else does, "don't be in a hurry, a healthy garden needs its time to grow, not to be forced by your impatience."

It has always been true, but now even more so, because of the "haste syndrome" that I explained in chapter 16 of *The Power of Stupidity* (also online – gandalf.it/stupid/chap16.htm).

Everybody is rushing all the time. Often they don't know where they are going and why. Haste causes all sort of mistakes – and trying to correct them takes much longer than the time (days, hours or minutes – sometimes seconds) needed to understand what we are doing instead of heading blindly into dead ends.

And there are interferences. Something started with a concept and an objective. Along the way, someone finds a different one (or it turns out that, for egoistic reasons or perspective errors, some people had something else in mind from the beginning.)

Misunderstandings are practically unavoidable. If differences were clear, it wouldn't be a serious problem. People could decide which way they want to go, cooperation and convergence could be reorganized accordingly. But too often clarity is missing. And so even the best ideas can get lost in the mess.

Sometimes it may be acceptable for some people to be cooperating while not sharing, or not understanding, the objective. As long as they do what they are supposed to, for a while they may be useful. But we need to understand that, over time, paths will split and teamwork will have to be reorganized.

As far as I can see, there is no standard remedy, no easy panacea for solving these problems. But knowing that they exist can be very useful.

Mistakes and misunderstandings are unavoidable. But, quite often, they can help. When something doesn't work, it can be an opportunity to find a better way.

Distressing as it is, even "plop" can be a tool – if and when it helps us to understand the environment in a different, and more promising, perspective.